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Head Hunting in the NHL Playoffs: Not the Beautiful Game seen in the Olympics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Is it just me or does headhunting in the National Hockey League look to be on the rise in this new playoff season?

No doubt you have seen the more vicious of these muggings on your television screen over the past few days. Kyle McLaren's attempted decapitation of Richard Zednik was easily the most spectacular of these moments of mayhem. McLaren offered this comment after his suspension for the duration of the series with Montreal: "I would like to repeat that my action was in no way intentional, it just happened as part of the play, and I wish Richard Zednik a speedy recovery." And I am sure he was being completely sincere in saying so.

Zednik, had a broken nose, concussion, bruised throat and cuts on his face. Incidentally Zednik scored both Montreal goals in the game and was Montreal's leading playoff scorer at the time of the elbow to the face. He has not scored since.

By all accounts, including the videotape, this was the most spectacular of the "clean hockey hits" of the playoffs. Everyone broadcasting the game and offering analysis for ESPN and ABC assures us that it was a clean hit. A tough hockey check, but a clean play, they say, just part of the game.

There have been a lot of other hits, clean and not so clean, during this first round of play. In fact I have been amazed by the amount of hitting to the head this year, not to mention crosschecks to the back, back of the neck, and back of the head. It's like there has been some sort of bonus system set up for those most successful in delivering these shots.

The head seems to have become the leading target in the National Hockey League. Over the past two weeks I have seen an amazing number of blows to the head, and most of them go unpunished. I saw a stick inserted crosswise into the mouth of a player that drew blood and no doubt extracted a few teeth. No penalty. No whistle. No doubt the referee wanted the players to decide the outcome of the game on the ice. Yes, let them play!

Is there any other sport where the object seems to be to take out as many star players as possible? And that clearly is the objective, and it is one that is being carried out with considerable efficiency. Is there any sport where there seems to be a premium placed on the destruction of the product? Even the most violent of sports, the National Football League, does its best to protect its players, or at least its star players from concussions.

In hockey the code is one of hard hits. Giving them and taking them are highly praised and highly valued. This is what hockey is all about. Or is it?

If you think back just two months there was some great hockey being played by many of these same players without the blows to the head, without the fighting, although with plenty of body checking and other hard hits. The resulting hockey on the ice was much faster paced, showcasing the skills of the game, and displaying the grace, beauty, and marvelous flow of this complex and high stylized sport.

Throughout the two weeks of play the casual hockey fans were amazed by what a great game ice hockey can be when played without a "clutch and grab" and a "goon" mentality. It was not "Survivor on Ice" in Salt Lake City but rather the showcasing of hockey at the highest possible level. The result was stunning. The games the U.S. played against Russia and Canada, the Canadian game against Sweden, and many others offered hockey at its best.

Where is this kind of hockey now? Why has it disappeared?

The National Hockey League, which should be the beneficiary of this showcasing of its sport, doesn't believe that the fans will come out and watch hockey without the violence. They may be right.

Certainly those students at Ithaca College who told Steve Mosher during the Olympics that they couldn't wait for the return of "real" hockey prefer the current product. If you attend an NHL game and you see how the fighting is highlighted and enhanced for the fans in the arena, and the reaction of these fans, you would likely agree that there is no place for violence free hockey.

The National Hockey League markets the violence. The fights are spotlighted in the arena. Small children, and adult

children, are encouraged to cheer on the fighters, curse the evil doers, and enjoy the blood lust. The big television screens focus on the fighting, posturing, threatening, and preening of the combatants. The WWF analogy is self-evident.

Unless players are expendable or the Age of Rollerball is already here, someone must finally say that hitting is part of the game, but that violence is not. That fighting will not be tolerated and that any assault on the head or the knee are simply not acceptable.

Do I think this will happen? No.

It's going to take a lot more carnage and more intentional destruction of the product before anything will change.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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